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ABSTRACT

One method developed by a teacher to help students improve their writing involved having the students analyze their skills based on a scale they themselves had created that described what a good writer should know or do. Having classified the skills mentioned by the students in a hierarchy from elemental to complex, the teacher evaluated the students based on what each thought were the most important skills. She found that her classification of students as advanced, average, or immature writers was related to the sophistication of their responses to the question about important skills for a writer to have. She used the hierarchy to create writing assignments appropriate to the skill level of each student. (The responses of each student to the questions used to form the scale are included in an appendix.) (TJ)

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UNH/PORTSMOUTH TEACHER CORPS PROJECT

Cycle XII

University of New Hampshire

ASK THEM:

ACTION RESEARCH IN TEACHING WRITING

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ASK THEM

It is September 12, and you have just read Richard's first written assignment. The sentence structure is okay, but the paper rambles, and you wouldn't read it if you weren't the teacher. Where do you begin?

One way to approach students' writing is to ask them what they feel is important for a good writer to know or to do well. Last year I asked my seventh-grade students this question, assuming they would mention the areas of writing they were struggling with. Knowing what they saw as difficulties, I could then help them improve.

ACTION RESEARCH

After interviewing my students, I categorized their responses and listed them from what I determined were the most elemental to the most complex writing skills or concepts. I added two areas to the top of the scale even though my students didn't mention them. One student response I couldn't fit into my scale--motivation for writing ("you have to want to write.").

11 - integrity and depth
10 - concise writing
9 - diction
8 - details
7 - purpose, focus
6 - orgar'zation
5 - information
4 - grammatical errors
3 - capitalization, punctuation
2 - spelling
1 - neatness, penmanship

As a test for my hierarchy, I classified my students as immature, average, or advanced writers based on a semester of writing. Next, I tried to determine whether certain responses typified each group and if these responses correlated with my hierarchy. Using a scale of 1-11, I rated each student according to the highest response she gave. For example, if Carolyn said, "A good writer needs to know grammar, have a good imagination and use details," she would be rated an 8 as details are 8 on the hierarchy. When I averaged each group, I had the following scores: advanced--6.28 points, average--5.44 points, immature--4.57 points. At least a surface correlation existed between their responses

and my hierarchy. Advanced students appeared to be dealing with information, organization and purpose. (Six of seven students in this group mentioned some source of information.) The most immature writers couldn't seem to get beyond spelling and mechanics. (Only two suggested anything about information.)

Because I had made two subjective decisions (the hierarchy and student ability groupings), I decided to compare my class's response to another seventh grade English class. I went through the same interview procedure. I then asked their teacher to group them by ability. The scores for those groups also appeared to correlate with the hierarchy, though the differences between the groups were less defined: advanced students--4.62 points, average--3.77 points, immature--3.20 points. Advanced students mentioned information and organization. (Six of eight mentioned knowledge of subject and/or imagination.) Average students also centered on information, but grammar and mechanics gained in importance. (Seven of nine mentioned knowledge of subject or imagination; seven of nine also mentioned grammar or mechanics.) Immature writers were divided with five focusing on information and five on mechanics.

It is interesting to note that with my students, where more instruction on the writing process took place, there was a greater spread between each level. I would like to conclude that this difference is due to using a writing laboratory, conference approach.

Teacher	Classroom A	Classroom B
advanced	7 students 6.28 pts.	8 students 4.62 pts.
average	9 students 5.44 pts.	9 students 3.77 pts.
immature	7 students 4.57 pts	10 students 3.20 pts.

I also tabulated results on a second class of mine. I asked them to write out a short answer to the question of what a writer needs to do well to be a good writer. The results for the group were higher, but still correlated: advanced 7.33, average 6.22, immature 5.40 points.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

From these three test groups I concluded that my hierarchy is a reliable tool for determining the maturity of seventh grade writers. The information gained can be used to analyze a student's strengths and weaknesses, then to prescribe work in the areas he needs through small group activities and conferences. For example, Alan Pufahl said a good writer needs to know grammar, have a good imagination and use good details. I asked Alan to explain what he meant by these terms to be sure we understood each other. Grammar for Alan meant punctuation. It now makes sense for me to put Alan in a group working on stimulating imagination or working on details in writing. He has identified such "skills" as important and will probably be ready for guided activities emphasizing them. In conference I might work with Alan on punctuation problems he senses. Practice exercises may be prescribed. Conquering these weaknesses will give him confidence and keep small errors from interfering in the early stages of the writing process. Finally, I would check Alan's writing for focus and organization, areas he didn't mention but which are near his maturity level. He may need to work on these areas as well through conference and group work.

FURTHER RESEARCH

After my students had written several papers, I asked them to decide which of their papers was their best and to explain why. I hoped to discover whether they used the same standards to judge their own writing as

identified for good writers in general. Again, I rated their responses 1-11 using my hierarchy.

Teacher	Classroom A	Classroom B
advanced group	6.0	4.87
average group	6.22	4.33
immature group	5.0	4.25

The range of responses on this question was much smaller. Although more immature writers (5/7, 4/9) chose as their best paper the paper with the subject they liked most, the general trend for all students was to focus on content. "I like it better; I got to cut down my friends," or "It expresses my feelings and helps me figure out who my friends are."

What I learned by asking them to defend their best writing was that most students do not evaluate their own writing using the same standards they consider important for good writers in general. The more mature writers did tend to consider more stylistic concerns, but content was the deciding factor for the majority. These results indicate a need to deal with most seventh grade writing at the content level first, expanding into organization, purpose and details. Perhaps we should approach criticism of student papers by looking for missing parts of information. Peer criticism, in particular, should begin with questions such as: what does this person know? where do we see this? what does the paper need? These are questions of information, questions seventh graders appear willing to consider because they value content in their own writing. Students will need to be shown how to question the quality of their own writing as well as that of others, but we must begin with what they consider important.

I feel the responses to this question support the idea of allowing writers to choose their own topics. Students value those papers about subjects important to them. Teachers cannot tell them what these subjects

are, but students can discover them through free writing. Young writers do not write well about subjects they know or care little about. Consequently, they select as their best papers those interesting to them.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

As teachers, we need to ask our students about writing, their own as well as others; such information can be a starting point for work on particular components of writing. We should not concern ourselves with specific errors on specific assignments, rather we should analyze the student's writing process. To do so, we need to ask the student how he writes, what is important in good writing, and how he sees his own writing. Research tells us very little about how people write. I hope that this action research demonstrates the value of asking them.

QUESTION:
"What Does a Writer Need to Know or Do Well to Be a Good Writer?"

Classroom A

Group 1 advanced	Data
Sherri	where periods and commas go/know subject/mechanics
Phil	know subject/be in mood/you have to want to write something
Diane	know subject/very vocabulary/get an editor for mechanics
Laura	ambition; writer has to want to write/discipline to do it/ lots of ideas from people
Gary	imagination/experience to talk about/good characters
Diana	know subject/direction; think about an aim or main thing/be in the mood/spelling and grammar
John	tell people what he's trying to write/get them so they know the characters
Group 2 average	
Donna	experience/get emotionally involved/show the motivation of characters
Robin Bo.	know subject/put things in the right words/cut extras
Robin Bi.	imagination/know subject/experience/grammar and stuff/editing
Karen	descriptive words/create suspense/sometimes be funny
Ralph	know where to look for information/get ideas/put things in your own words
Mike	feelings in writing/opinions/imagination/spelling
Jim	facts; where he's going to get information/places shown/penmanship/paragraphs, sentences/punctuation
Audrey	spelling/make sense/don't mix words up/make it interesting/ describe characters/use different words
Fred B.	good imagination
Alan	grammar/imagination/good details
Rhonda	I don't know.

Group 3
Immature

Eric	spelling/how to write a story/plot if mystery; horrifying if a horror story
Cindy	punctuation/good language/imagination/has to like writing
Fred R.	spelling/know subjects/a good title/punctuation
Judy	spelling/punctuation
Mark	feeling in it/life-like
Janet	spelling/penmanship/how to set up paper/something to write about

"What Does a Writer Need to Know or Do Well to Be a Good Writer?"

Classroom AA

Group 1 advanced	Data
Lori	how to form sentences; put ideas together; combine sentences, good imagination
Kathy	capture and hold the reader's attention/I don't know how
Tracy	describe things well for reader to get clear picture/explain complex parts
Mike	know audience, why writing, point of view and who is telling it
David	express feelings in words/use words in sentences so they run together well
Pam	good imagination/spell/express feelings on paper/use criticism constructively/use English properly/good vocabulary for interesting words/like to read
Group 2 average	
Mark	know subject/want to be a writer/capability and want to be good/good English and grammar
Lee	know subject/punctuation
Lisa	a good imagination/patience/good grammar/"guts"/puncutation/understanding
Carol	good vocabulary/know subject
Mark	good penmanship/spelling/imagination
Teresa	imagination/feel what he writes, get into his writing/search out story-know more about it/know why he wrote it
Karen	good vocabulary to vary/know subject
Des	know subject and show it
John	spelling/practice/have patience because it could take a year to get this book published/needs to read it over and over
Group 3 Immature	
John M.	spell/write sentences and paragraphs/punctuate/grammar
Karl	good words and comprehension; if not it will sound funny

Group 3
Immature (con'd)

Louis	spelling
Joe	create things/spell/practice so write good and not make lots of mistakes
Christie	concentration-able to concentrate and think about subject
Pat	know subject/good vocabulary
Vicki	know subject/put in order/I don't know
Natalie	imagination/ideas/patience/I don't know
Stan	imagination/how to put words together
Debbie	know the story/make it sound right/know what he's doing/I don't know

QUESTION:
"What Does a Writer Need to Know or Do Well to Be a Good Writer?"

Classroom B

Group 1
advanced

Stacy	imagination
April	imagination
Karen	imagination
Frances	imagination and know subject
Jenny	imagination and know subject
Sue	subject you like/body and stuff
Maria	facts/main idea
Tom	vocabulary/good English/organization

Group 2
average

Jeannette	imagination
John B.	punctuation/how to read
Kerry	imagination
Kathy	imagination
Debbie	imagination/know subject/spelling
Mike	know subject/organization
David	know subject/punctuation
John P.	English and everything/imagination
Mark	punctuation and stuff/proofreading and stuff

Group 3
Immature

Randy	imagination
Shannon	know subject

Group 3
Immature (con'd)

Jay C.	know subject
Kevin	know subject/put words in right order
Taylor	know subject/proper English
Andy	outline/good beginning and end
Norman	spelling/punctuation/like to read
Stacy B.	spelling/proofreading
Denise	I don't know/neatness
Becky	I don't know/read

Question: "Which Is Your Best Piece of Writing and Why?"

Classroom A

Group 1
advanced

Sherri	more details about what's happening and what things look like
Phil	more fun writing it/I like writing comedy
Diane	less gross/I like the plot better--the meaning/lots of description
Laura	tells about me/I like the ending/good dialogue
Gary	I know a lot about bottles/more facts
Diana	took more time/more careful/good idea
John	about my sisters/don't explain it too good--should have told more about how they were by having them do things

Group 2
average

Donna	love horses/important incident to me/expresses feelings--brings out sadness
Robin	words in better ways--more dialogue
"	friendly, like it was a relationship between the characters/ sorta sad
Karen	(new student, so not enough writing to check)
Ralph	like subject/better character motivation/more detail
Mike	a lot of action/sadness, feelings
Jim	funny/I made it up
Audrey	it's the only story I could find an ending to/I liked it
Fred	more action/like science fiction
Alan	more into it/more work and imagination
Rhonda	None were good. I just picked one.

Group 3
Immature

Eric	like it better/got to cut down my friends
Cindy	others dumb stories though good mechanics/wanted to do one about my age group
Fred	only thing I could think of that I liked
Judy	Kiss is my favorite/I worked my hardest/all true; good information/I like writing about this group
Mark	I don't know. My favorite part is the crash. That's where the action is.
Janet	I just liked it; how they made friends, got lost, found their way again/best idea

Question: "Which is Your Best Writing and Why?"

Classroom B

Group 1
advanced

Stacy	I like to rhyme things
April	I don't know/'cause it's about the future
Karen	I liked the meadow one because it gave me something I knew to write about
Frances	I got 100 on it.
Jenny	Because you get to put your own feeling in it, make them do what you want them to. I write best when I can write what I want.
Sue	More control/I liked the action and suspense and stuff.
Maria	I can't write.
Tom	Probably had to work on it a long time/thought a long time before I even started

Group 2
average

Jeannette	expresses my feelings/helps me figure out who my friends are
John	It took a long time/I think it's good
Kerry	Some of the things I wrote about happened to me.
Kathy	I haven't writ' one like that before (You enjoyed the memory?) Yeah.
Debbie	I had fun doing it/I could almost see what they were doing.
Mike	more organized; the first time I got a 10 on it (final grade=90)
David	I like talking about endangered species/knew more about subject
John	more details/a little funny
Mark	I got an A on it

Group 3
Immature

Randy	because I like basketball and writing about it

Group 3
Immature (con'd)

Shannon	I used a lot of expressive words
Jay	sounded good
Kevin	I got a high mark on that one
Taylor	I don't know
Andy	lots of ideas/put together well
Norman	Don't have much; don't like to write/can't write
Stacy	I liked it and I have a friend in Virginia. We write to each other
Denise	It's my story. I made it up/I got a good mark on it.
Becky	more interesting (How?)/I like painting and it's about a man who paints.